DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 211 PS 028 207

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TITLE Parent Observation of a Teacher-Parent Relationship in Early Childhood Education.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Cultural Differences; Immigrants; Kindergarten; Kindergarten Children; Limited English Speaking; *Parent School Relationship; *Parent Teacher Cooperation; *Parents; Preschool Teachers; Primary Education
IDENTIFIERS *Language Barriers; Parent Needs

ABSTRACT

Building a strong relationship between parents and their preschool-aged child's teacher can be difficult when the parents and teachers speak different languages and come from different cultures. This paper discusses how a parent from east Africa with language and cultural differences dealt with a local school system to ensure that her young children with speech and language delay obtained the educational and developmental services needed. The paper describes lessons learned to immigrant parents of children who speak English as a second language facing similar barriers. The paper also notes the special needs of parents with language and cultural differences and provides suggestions for early childhood education administrators and teachers on how to handle such needs and concerns. Contains 14 references. (Author/KB)

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ED 437 211

Parent Observation of A Teacher-Parent Relationship in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

This article is about a parent's observations of a teacher-parent relationship in early childhood education. It discusses how a parent from east Africa with language and culture differences deals with a local school system to ensure that her child with speech and language delay gets the educational and developmental services that he needs. The articles provides lessons learned to immigrant parents of children with English as a second language who face similar barriers. It also gives insights to early childhood school administrators and teachers on the special needs of parents with language and cultural differences and on possible ways to handle such needs and concerns.

Introduction

A solid relationship between the teacher, the child and the parent is a strong foundation for a child's learning and development. This tripartite partnership has been increasingly gaining importance in recent years. As many parents of different linguistic and cultural background send their small children to pre-kindergarten schools, they faced many problems that could be minimized through proper information and consultation between parents and teachers. By conferring with other parents, a child's potential delay can be

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detected and early intervention measures can be taken. In this case, a three year old boy's mother, from east Africa, found out from one of the parents of a child in her daughter's pre-k that a government funded therapy was available. From that time on, the parent start to fulfill all the necessary requirements and succeeded in enrolling him in a speech and language therapy program. This mother has been involved in her son's school for two years trying to convince the school of the special needs of her son. In the meantime, she got a lot of misunderstanding and discouragement from the school, but she persevered and prevailed using participation methods such as volunteering as a room mother. Later on she got a position in the school as a part-time special teacher's aide. This article describes the experience and lessons learned from a parent's endurance and dedication in ensuring her pre-k son's solid head start in his education. The purpose of this article is to help parents in the same situation, especially new immigrants from east Africa who have different linguistic and cultural background from the host country, to be advocates for their children's educational rights. Also, it attempts to inform the school personnel (both teachers, aides, administrators, psychologists, counselors, special area teachers and therapists) about the special needs of children of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These educators can easily misunderstand problems related to language and cultural background with behavioral and educational disability.

Why A Strong Relationship Between Parents and Teachers is Important

The importance of parents' involvement in their child's education has been a subject of discussion of many writers and educators in the U. S. Some states, as in the case of

Tennessee, have recently mandated that parents who are not adequately involved in their children's education are subject to a fine of "$50 for PDD (which stands for Parenting Deficit Disorder)." A study that was carried out by the American Psychological Association in 1994, concluded that "parental involvement was a significant predictor of student achievement and behavior in school." (Levine 1997, p. 27). As an African proverb puts it, "It takes a village to raise a child". The imperatives of parents' involvement in a child's educational and social development become even more decisive particularly for parents of different linguistic and cultural background to ensure successful educational and social development of the child.

How Parents Can Develop a Sound Relationship With Their Child's Teacher

A good relationship needs to be worked on from day one, starting the first day of school. This becomes crucial especially for children in kindergarten and those with special education needs. Parents with English as their second language have to pay even more attention, although being relatively new-comers to this country may burden them with many competing positions and livelihood responsibilities and put more demand on their scarce time.

Unlike in the U. S., on the first day of school parents in Japan offer flowers to their children's teacher. This is to show their respect and their appreciation to the teacher; at the same time, to show the child that the teacher is a very important person in their lives. Parents may also need to express their goodwill and cooperation to the teacher, and they

need to find out what the teacher's expectations from her students are. On the first day of school, some teachers distribute a *survey sheet* to be filled out by parents in order to know the students and have an easy transactional year. The parent needs to be aware of this survey and complete it diligently by providing all critical information about the child. For example, the survey may include:

- All concerns that you have and wish to share with the teacher about the child;
- Home environment, culture, language and size of the family members;
- Child's strengths and weaknesses;
- Share any information that might help the teacher better understand your child (Newman, 1997-98).

It helps a lot also to exchange telephone numbers. Some teachers may not feel comfortable in giving their telephone numbers; if they can give, ask for it. It is naïve to think that the survey could provide the teacher with all the necessary information about your child. In order to help you continue to confer with the teacher and understand more about her rules and expectations in class, the importance of exchanging telephone numbers should not be underestimated.

Effective communication usually takes place when two parties, in this case a parent and a teacher, speak a common language; otherwise, a language barrier might pose great difficulty. As a matter of fact, for some languages such as Spanish and Japanese, schools may offer interpreters, but in the case of many languages from developing countries, it is hard to get such interpretation services. The absence of effective communication may put

the teacher and the parents as well the child in a difficult situation, and seemingly trivial misunderstanding could flare up into antagonistic conflict between the parents and the teacher, and eventually the school. Because teachers have the most contact with families, they may be able to provide information on the families preferred methods of communication (Thompson & Jean , 1997). Unless the teacher is highly experienced, and able to use very simple English, the teacher may invite a bilingual teacher (for help) in the conference.

Unlike the school system here, many other cultures do not expect a pre-k child to be self-sufficient and it is acceptable for a child to grow at his/her own pace. The pre-k here often puts a child from other cultures in an awkward position, and easily labels the child "slow" and not fulfilling the school requirements. In addition, the school looks at the parents as excessively babying the child and not letting him grow independently; thus, these parents are not fulfilling their parental duty. As a result, the parents start resenting the school and teacher's apparent extreme expectations from the child. For example, in a pre-k school, an east African mother who helped her child at the beginning of a school year unpack his back pack, sort out in his homework and lunch money in his folder every morning is considered inappropriate from the school's point of view, while this practice is perfectly all right in her own culture. Another important factor is that some cultures (such as Eritrea) forbid a child to look at adult's eye when speaking to adults or when adults speak to the child, while the pre-k school here may consider a child who avoids eye contact as a behavioral problem and at worst as impolite. Obviously, children from different cultural and linguistic background may not be expected to know how to interact in such situations which children from the mainstream may take for granted. Therefore

sensitivity to cultural differences is important otherwise the "fit in or get out" mentality will not promote an effective partnership with the parents from culturally diverse background (Voltz,1994). Other barrier could be that the parent might not be able to read the messages sent home by the teacher and to respond and help the child promptly. Parents in particular may be embarrassed to be found to have less skill in reading and writing than their children (Litwak & Meyer 1974). Depending on the teacher's time availability, parents normally should be contacted by phone if they need any help, and explained the consequences that follow if the child fails to do an assigned home work or return papers sent home to be filled by the parent. Homework's possibilities for enriching a child's education are surprisingly far reaching (Harrington & Young, 1993 p.107).

Observation Conducted on An Immigrant Family From East Africa

The observation was conducted over the last two years on a family, who immigrated from East Africa about nine years ago. Their youngest son, Daniel, now five years old, was evaluated at the age of three as having speech and language delays. All the problems that the parents had to face in parent-teacher conference and while volunteering in the classroom will be further discussed.

Student background

Student: Daniel

Age: 5

Grade: K

Daniel's weight at birth was 8 lb. 13 3/4th oz. He was a full term child and healthy child, but he has a delay in language mainly because his family spoke another language at home. He is a bright boy and as a result, after, taking a leiter (a non-verbal) entrance exam, he has been accepted to the gifted and talented school.

Family Data:

The family includes four children, two parents and an uncle. Mom works in Daniel's school as a para-professional from 8:45 am – 3:15pm, and dad works from 9:00am – 6:00 pm as a professional. Efriem 15, Saba 14, Elsa 7. Uncle works day and night shifts. Parents have different cultural, linguistic and values background.

Preparing for Parent-Teacher Conferences and Outcome

As Canady & Seyfarth (1979, p. 12) indicated in their booklet *"How Parent-Teacher Conferences Build Partnership"* parents of handicapped children often look for specific help from the teachers, because the parents are unusually sensitive to the particular needs

of their children. These parents often request answers to the following questions: i) How does a child get along with others in class? ii) Is the child's behavior acceptable? iii) How can parents teach particular skills to the child? iv) What is the child expected to learn? v) Is the child performing at or near to the level of his or her ability? Parents unlike teachers are more interested in school goals and organization and academic progress rather than the social adjustments of any other kind. In the case of the Daniel's parents, they were never satisfied by the answers they got from the teacher for the above questions. Their language and cultural difference was not put into consideration.

Successful conference is when the parent and the teacher leave with a better understanding of what each other is trying to do.(Canady & Seyfarth 1979, p. 10). Parents can request for a conference or teachers can give a conference time and date whenever it is needed. They should be informed of who will attend the conference. Otherwise the parents could be intimidated when confronted with one or more school personnel. It is important that therapists and other special area teachers if possible be present in the meeting. For example, in Daniel's case, with a language and speech delay, the presence of the speech therapist and ESL teacher was important and played a big role in the discussion and contributed a lot to the conference outcome. Parents too should bring to the teachers' attention any concerns that they have prepared in advance of the conference. For instance, when Daniel's mom went to pick him up from school his teacher called him and asked him what he did that day. He answered that he read a book. And she continued asking him, *"And eventually? And eventually"* At this moment unable to comprehend the meaning of the word he walked away from his teacher. The teacher didn't seem to realize

that she lost his attention because of the language problem. However, she interpreted it that he had a short attention span, and poor concentration. Instead, she should have given him the benefit of the doubt by changing the words around such as *"And then what happened?"* or using a simple word until he responded to the question at hand. The mother raised the issue at the time of the conference. This helped the assistant principal to realize that the teacher wrongly labeled Daniel with behavioral problem. In fact, in the child's home English is used only 10 – 20 percent of the time, while 80 percent the family spoke its own indigenous language. Clearly, the child's problem ended up being with English language comprehension, which regrettably started to project as if he had intellectual and social difficulties in school. Careful analysis and deeper understanding of causes of child's seemingly behavioral problem is second to none. Because of time constraints and other reasons, teachers may be tempted to jump into conclusions, which further worsens the situation and not helping the child in anyway. The goal should be to involve the child in positive social experiences and to be as encouraging and as positive as a teacher can be whenever she can.

On the other hand, parents should foster casual conference, which can help them to exchange information on their child's daily progress. Parents and teachers should be very sensitive to each other and have to respond adequately. Especially parents need at times to remove themselves from subjective feeling about their child and try to be objective and listen carefully to what the teacher has to say. When the teacher see a behavior problem in a child, then the school administration should provide support to the concerned parent,

and encourage an atmosphere of collaboration. Parent-teacher conference is a valuable tool in providing feed back and building strong partnerships.

Knowing the Whole Child

A teacher should try to know the whole child, home and school environment. Otherwise the teacher would wrongly label that particular child, especially if he is a boy and if he displays emotions in a very different way (very expressive or very uncontrolled) as ADHD, and forces him to depend on developmental dangerous drugs like *Ritalin* (Levine, 1997, p.36). A teacher should try different methods and try to model language and use non-verbal cues and work with the parents. A teacher must be sensitive to parental feeling such as denial, anger, embarrassment, loss, isolation, or blame.

Each family is unique. Acknowledgment of the parent's knowledge and skill in working with their child leads to parental ownership in solutions and greater assistance with intervention and planning. A teacher should be more aware of the problems of the language barriers, especially of new immigrants who do not speak well English language, and do not use jargons, such as IEP, ADHD, dyslexia, learning disability, etc.

In the case of Daniel, who goes to a public school far from his residence and lives in a white affluent neighborhood, it is very difficult for him to have after school play experiences with the children in his area. As a result, he is prone to be socially immature which contributed to his lack of confidence or skills necessary to make new friends or

function in new surroundings. A teacher should need to enhance communication with families by using culturally responsive interaction practices (Lu Ann Jordan, Maria E. Reyes-Blanes, Betty B. Peel, Henry A. Peel, & Holly B. Lane") to truly understand the complexities of each of the students life histories.

Differences Between Experienced and Non-experienced Teacher

Experienced teachers are more open to learn about a child and his/her home environment. For example, last year when Daniel was in pre-k, his parents faced a lot of misunderstanding and arguments with the teacher, because she was young and inexperienced. Fortunately, this year in kindergarten, he got an experienced and mature teacher with practical background in nursing. This tends to make her caring and sensitive to children's needs. She is open to provide Daniel's mother daily progress report and as a result the mother started to feel better and have more trust and confidence in the teacher. The most difficult and challenging experience for parents like Daniel's is lack of any background in the American educational system. Usually they are challenged by the school standards, accepted behavioral norms, approaching the school personnel, such as school therapists, counselors, psychologists, secretaries, and PTAs. Since they do not have information about schools' expectations, having an experienced teacher helps tremendously. They normally tell you before hand the appropriate time to request for conferences. In some cases, they inform parents of the necessity of coming to school meeting, how to shop for the best teacher before school starts, how to familiarize the

child with the school environment, and how to level off expectations. Certainly parents involvement in their children's school is expected and is of at most importance.

What Can a Parent Do to Help His Child

Being from different ethnic and cultural background, coming to conferences might not be easy for the parents especially if the teacher does not understand the linguistic and cultural difference. As a result, this kind of parents are less informed than other parents in the mainstream (Linan-Thompes & Jean, 1997, p.46). School personnel should stop using jargon language in dealing with parents like the Daniel's parents. They should instead try to enhance communication by explaining how any potential disability or language barrier might affect the learning process, and identifying what the family and school personnel should do together to improve the child's academic and social performance in school. The teacher should not be interested only in the child's weaknesses but should also encourage the growth of the child's strengths. Parents from ethnic and language background should be encouraged to volunteer in schools whenever possible. That could help the teacher, the child and the parent to understand each other through the learning of what is going on in the classroom. If parents are able to help the child to complete his/her homework at home is an asset too. Sometimes volunteering in your own child's classroom might not be as effective as expected. Especially if the school has bias towards people with different language and ethnic background. For example, Daniel's mom tried to volunteer once a week in pre-k class of her child, but it was stopped after a bad accusation from the teacher and one of the administrators saying

that the mother was only helping her child and not the rest of the class. The mother bought different kind of apples and asked the children to chop the apples into small pieces and also made apple sauce for the whole class. She read books to the class. Despite all this, the teacher felt that in the mothers' presence the child seemed to disregard her rules. The mother was hurt by this incidence, because she failed to understand the politics of the school.

Anecdotes on Brief Case Stories

Daniel's mother's observation of her son's interaction with her child's teacher include the following. On the first day of school, Daniel's teacher asked him to line up. But, unable to understand her instruction, he kept sitting and smiling at her. The teacher was infuriated and gave him time out and made sit in the "*sat chair*". When the teacher told the mother of the incidence, the mother felt so bad for Daniel did not know what "*line up*" means. He had never been separated from his mother and never had any formal schooling. The teacher completely forgot that he had language problem too. Another incidence is when Daniel was sitting on the rug and came to the teacher to ask a question, the teacher answered, "Go back to your spot." The child, unable to understand the order, was staring at the teacher. That got her upset. The mother interfered telling her son "Go back to your seat". That made a lot of difference in the child's understanding of the instruction and he followed her instructions promptly.

In a recent example, with Daniel's kindergarten teacher, who is a mature educator, still has her mind set on his behavior. Recently, he left his snack bag in class; the next day he

brought his snack in a brown bag to class. Unfortunately, he forgot to take it from his bag and put it with the rest of the class in the snack basket. And at snack time when he asked the teacher to have his snack from his locker, she told him to take the snack bag from the day before, unable to explain the whole story clearly because of language problems, the teacher punished him and he cried and he had a bad afternoon. When the mother came to pick him up, the teacher was ready to lay blame on the child for his behavior, but the mother opened his back bag and showed her his new snack. The teacher was really embarrassed and she apologized for her action. In similar cases, Ramsey noted that teachers frustrated by the extra work that these recent immigrants required, the teachers tended to dwell on the things that the children "didn't even know." Differences in lifestyle and language were interpreted as *ignorance* (Ramsey 1979, p. 134). Teachers should be more sensitive on the language they use and the attention they give in dealing with bilingual children. Also, when teachers better understand the real emotional issues that children face, they will be better able to embrace the joys and concerns of teaching the child with different linguistic and cultural background. (Barbara Foulk, Boyd)

Assistance to Classroom Teachers

ESL teachers should help the classroom teachers on different strategies and developmental appropriate materials and tools to use in dealing with bilingual children. Also, language therapists should also show different ways in handling a child's special needs in language. Some recommendations (Tesfamicael, 1998, p.5) that they could give may include:

- Do not interrupt or rash a child
- Do not pressure or demand the child
- Look at the child (eye contact) while she or he is talking
- Model smooth speech
- Obtain the child's attention before speaking
- Use simple, not complicated language
- Praise the child for correct responses
- Describe events in stories, using visual clues
- Provide repetition to help the child remember and learn new works
- Provide plenty of visual and tactile experiences; bring in concrete objects when introducing a new idea.

How Parents Can Get Involved in School

Get Involved in Parent-Teacher Association

Parents should be involved in their children's education, be a member of Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in order to have a closer contact with the teachers. Especially, parents of a child with special needs that relationship is crucial. It makes a lot of difference in a child when both parties, school and home, work hand in hand with certain issues. That bonding and partnership creates a sense of trust and bring up self-esteem, confidence in the child. For example, if there is any disciplinary problem, it should be corrected right

away before it becomes an issue. Parents should try to study the root causes and take certain steps to correct and to avoid it from happening again.

Help Your Child With His Her Homework

Families are extension of the school community, so is the homework. Parents should take homework assignment seriously and encourage their child to complete it in an orderly manner and hand it on the due date. For example, a bilingual child might have difficulty completing her/his school work in class, therefore, parents should ask the teacher to send it home so that with one on one attention and with a language he understands the child would be able to complete it at home. Daniel's mother feels that one to two hours a day of her time is assigned to help her son do his school work, and that helped him to start reading. It requires commitment, discipline, sacrifices, consistency and dedication from the parents side. One the other hand, busy parents should send their children to extended school day programme to help them with their homework. Still it is the school responsibility to explain carefully to the parents with English as their second language, the procedures that they have to follow to enroll their children into the above programme, and that every child no matter whether the parents are working or not is welcomed to the programme. Some public libraries also offer programmes to help children with their home works.

Final Thoughts

Educators have different responsibilities in the classroom. One of them is to be considerate of each and every child and parents needs. Their services need to have some resemblance to the attention the private sector company pays to its customers. It is important that they try to find and learn from research and close family members about what is acceptable and appropriate performance expected from a child of different background. If a teacher is not bilingual, she might have a hard time to see things from the non-English speaking parents' perspective. Ability to work hand in hand with the community of the parents is an asset. Sensitive school personnel will try to provide opportunities for developing as close and personal professional relationships between parents and teachers as is possible (Hymes, 1974, Newman, 1998, p. 101).

How children learn to organize their environment, which language they learn to speak, and how they occupy their leisure time all have significance for the kinds of the problems they will solve and the strategies they will use to do so. The languages children speak offer different opportunities and constraints for the expression of ideas. How children learn to display anger affects the nature of the social order (Bowman & Stott). For, example, Daniel at pre-kindergarten whenever the teacher raised her voice, he used to run away from the teacher, because he learned to react in the same manner at home. As Piaget point out, the young child at first confuses the subject and objective features of the environment and as a result he can experience frustration. But, gradually he becomes

capable of adapting his imagination to constraints of objective reality and even of re-fashioning the environment so that it is more compatibility with abilities, needs and desires (Bronfenbrenner).

Parent participation may increase if school personnel schedule ARD meetings at times that are convenient for the families, if they recognize extended family members as participants in the student educational development and if they encourage parents to assume leadership roles constant communication with parents is essential for effective communication (Thompson & Jen 1997, p.49).

The Mille Lacs project four-week kindergarten readiness programme in Onamia is an excellent way to prepare parents and children of different cultural and linguistic background to the expectation of kindergarten in the mainstream school system. The programme which is held in spring time helps the children to be acquainted with the new school, the new teacher and future classmates. It also designed to increase parents knowledge about the public school to provide parents with activities and materials to assist in developing their children's school readiness skills; involve children in the schools "Introduction to Kindergarten" session; develop communication system among parents, public school staff and the head start programme; and develop a support system within the school to provide linkages with other parents (Waxler, Thomson & Poblete 1990, p.28-29).

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